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# Where is Boris Johnson? When and why it matters that leaders show up in a crisis

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/lea](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/lea)**Leah Tomkins** 

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## Abstract

Now, more than at any time in our recent history, we will be judged by our capacity for compassion. (Rishi Sunak, UK Chancellor of the Exchequer, 20 March 2020).<sup>1</sup>

In this piece, I draw on an ethics of care and compassion to address a question that has been asked almost daily in UK politics over the past weeks and months, namely: Where is Boris Johnson? Johnson is a leader with a long-standing reputation for being selective about whether and when he shows up. On 16 March 2020, as the severity of the coronavirus finally seemed to register, Johnson agreed to start holding daily press briefings, bringing his previous track-record and apparent instinct for no-shows into sharp relief. Criticism was understandably stilled during his hospitalisation for the virus, but it was not long after his discharge from hospital before the question of his absences came back into focus, with renewed concern about his non-attendance at key COBRA meetings and his decision to go on holiday in mid-February as the virus had been taking hold.<sup>2</sup> Through the prism of the psychoanalytic caring leader, I reflect on some of the explanations for, and implications of, his absences, arguing that they do not always have the same function or effect. Some absences may be politically astute, as a way of promoting an anti-establishment message and/or reassuring his constituents of their own competence and efficacy. Other absences are decidedly risky, because they send a message that he does not care. In times of crisis, the scales of separation versus proximity – absence versus presence – tip differently to normal, and leaders who appear not to care risk triggering especially powerful anxieties about betrayal and abandonment. When it is impossible for us to be carefree, leaders must avoid being perceived or experienced as careless.

## Keywords

Caring leader, ethics of care, Boris Johnson, leadership absence, psychoanalysis

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## Introduction

I locate these reflections at the intersection of academic leadership studies and broader political and social commentary. I hope to contribute some thoughts on the emotions of leader/follower relations to both complement and challenge the strategies and commentary offered by political journalists and communications advisers. My main message for leaders (both in general and in particular) is that their duty of care is intensified in times of crisis and that this involves not only showing up, but also absorbing and enduring the distress and hostility they encounter, without deflecting, judging or retaliating. Moreover, I try to frame what our responses to leaders say *about us*. The more we understand why leaders make us feel the way we do, the more we might be able to alter, or at least articulate, these responses to help us get through these dark times. With their presence and their absence – their shows and their no-shows – their care and their carelessness – leaders give us data about ourselves and our own prospects for self-care.

## Setting the scene: Where is our leader?

History is littered with examples of leaders being admired for showing up in times of trouble – and excoriated if they do not. Leadership is strengthened, legitimised, even venerated when leaders appear at the site of crisis – both natural and man-made – and are able to handle the chaos of the situation and the distress and grief of those affected. In various ways, and with varying degrees of success, their overall ‘presence’ (that ‘elusive, ephemeral effect that a leader produces’, Fairhurst and Cooren (2009: 469)) is related to actual physical presence.

Leaders who do not show up in a crisis risk appearing insensitive and out of touch. For instance, Queen Elisabeth II experienced a rare threat to her monarchy after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, when she stayed secluded in Balmoral Castle in Scotland, rather than coming back to her official residence in London, and hence back to ‘her people’. Her absence at a time of public shock and grief was met with disbelief, then anger. For a period between Diana’s death and her funeral, feelings were running at fever pitch: The Queen was failing to demonstrate that she really cared – either about Diana or about us – creating a significant and urgent need for ‘image repair’ in the royal family (Benoit and Brinson, 1999). The headline in the Daily Express newspaper shrieked: Show us you care!<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, fêted examples of leaders showing up include New York Mayor, Rudy Giuliani’s very visible, very tangible presence after the attacks on 9/11. He not only apparently put himself at some personal risk but also engaged head-on with the extreme emotional dynamics of the attacks and their aftermath. The power of his leadership presence seemed to involve a mix of situational competence and emotional resilience. As Fairhurst (2007: 158) suggests:

Giuliani could have restricted himself to less emotion-ridden public gatherings such as press conferences, public memorials, and behind-the-scenes action... Instead, Giuliani networked with emotion-laden people and objects – funeral rites, the ‘fallen’ and their remains, caskets covered by the American flag, fire trucks as hearses, uniformed officers as pallbearers, churches with bells tolling, children clutching their fathers’ helmets, and so forth.

More recently, New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, has become known as a leader who shows up in a crisis. In the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque attack in 2019, Ardern demonstrated an intimacy of engagement that is unparalleled amongst contemporary political leaders. She placed herself in the midst of the suffering, hugging men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, with a tenderness that seemed devoid of artifice or calculation.<sup>4</sup> At Friday prayers, she adjusted her corporeal presence by wearing the hijab, a powerful symbol of being *within* the tragedy rather than above or apart from it. Her combination of empathy, emotional resilience and the efficiency with which she moved to introduce new gun laws seemed to crystallise what it means for leaders to embody and enact care (Sinclair and Ladkin, 2020).

Of course, simply showing up is not enough. There are vivid examples of leaders' appearances actually undermining their leadership. Fairhurst and Cooren (2009) highlight the example of Louisiana Governor, Kathleen Blanco, who was widely criticised for her performance in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in 2005. Both in person and in the media, she looked flustered and overwhelmed, thus heightening a collective sense of unmanaged and unmanageable disaster. Tomkins (2020) and Yates (2019a) discuss the case of former UK Prime Minister, Theresa May, who was berated for her approach to the Grenfell Tower fire in London in 2017. May did show up, but she restricted her encounters to members of the emergency services, apparently refusing to meet the families of the dead and the missing. In short, it looked as if she lacked the ability to react appropriately to suffering. Showing up is necessary but not sufficient to demonstrate that one cares.

I make no judgement (here) about what Theresa May or any other leader might actually have been feeling, or about what their shows or no-shows might say about them as people. My focus in this piece is not on whether, or how much, leaders actually *do* care about the suffering of their constituents, but rather, that they should *appear* to care. Creating the impression that one cares gives followers reassurance that their leaders both care *for* and care *about* them: Caring *for* me means attending to my needs in an immediate, practical sense; caring *about* me means being concerned about me in a more generalised and potentially policy-directed sense (Tomkins, 2020). Rightly or wrongly, when leaders do not show up, it gives the impression that they do not care.

## Why do we need leaders to care?

The notion of the caring leader has been explored from a number of theoretical perspectives, including the philosophies of Heidegger (Ciulla, 2009), Foucault (Ladkin, 2018) and Arendt (Gardiner, 2020). From a broadly positive psychological perspective, the caring leader has been associated with improved organizational performance (Cameron et al., 2003), increased organizational commitment (Lilius et al., 2012) and a bolstering of the moral dimension of organizational transformation (Simola et al., 2012). In their various ways, these analyses of caring leadership in organization and institution draw on the vibrant sociological, political and feminist literature on the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2015; Tronto, 1993).

Since my focus here is on how leaders awaken deep emotions and anxieties in their constituents, my main inspiration is Gabriel's (2015) psychoanalytic exploration of the caring leader. From a psychoanalytic perspective, leaders are prime recipients, or containers, of other people's projections, that is, they are an ideal canvas onto which to transpose our anxieties, needs, desires and fantasies. Just as once with our parents, so now with our

leaders, various defence mechanisms help us cope with the complexities of the world, including projection (displacing unwanted feelings onto another person or object) and splitting (dealing with anxiety by splitting people and objects into good or bad). So indispensable is this psychological service that 'if no one with leadership abilities were available we would have to invent such a person' (Kets de Vries, 1989: 22).

Our projections onto leaders are especially marked in times of crisis or distress. Crisis situations stir up feelings of impotence, reminding us of our helplessness in infancy and reawakening a primal need for nurturing, comfort, strength and guidance. When the world feels unmanageable, we look to leaders to steer us through the crisis and give us explanations for otherwise inexplicable events. When they succeed at this, we hero-worship them. When they fail, we make them our scapegoats. Seen through this prism of primitive emotions, memories, needs and desires, it is no wonder that we judge our leaders against more extreme, saint-or-sinner criteria than any other professional group (Gabriel, 2015; Kets de Vries, 1989).

Thus, Gabriel's (2015) elaboration of the caring leader proposes that our expectations of leaders are shaped by familial archetypes as well as our early childhood experiences of authority which leave lasting traces and get rekindled and replayed in adulthood. Based on the primal template of father and mother, leaders in our adult life are experienced as an all-powerful father-figure and/or an all-loving, caring, accessible mother-figure. The paternal archetype can be seen in notions of heroic leadership, which is stubbornly resistant to efforts to displace it with a 'post-heroic' perspective, at least in the public imagination (Grint, 2010).

As Gabriel (2015) argues, the maternal archetype has received less attention from leadership scholars, and the passion with which we react to leaders who do not seem to care suggests that such attention is long overdue. The emphasis on accessibility, availability and reliability in the caring leader as maternal archetype helps to explain why not showing up in times of trouble can have such a devastating effect on how followers feel, and how they subsequently judge their leaders.<sup>5</sup> If our leader does not care enough to be with us to recognise and becalm our troubles, this can trigger a primal fear of abandonment and betrayal and inflict immense damage on our feelings of security and well-being. Such feelings are extraordinarily powerful, not least because they operate partly, if not fully, submerged in our unconscious. This underscores the paradoxical nature of leadership work: Leaders have to appeal to the rational capacities of followers with sensible explanations and logical, 'evidence-based' policies, whilst also – inevitably and largely uncontrollably – playing to the theatrics of their unconscious (Kets de Vries, 1989).

## So, where is Boris Johnson?

Boris Johnson is a political leader with a vibrant persona and a checkered track record. His leadership roles have included Mayor of London, figurehead for the UK's Brexit campaign, and now Prime Minister, responsible *inter alia* for taking the UK out of the EU. At the end of 2019, after the chaos of his predecessor's handling of the EU exit negotiations, and with parliament deadlocked, he took the high-stakes decision to call a general election and was returned to power with the largest parliamentary majority for the Conservatives since the 1980s. During the first months of 2020, he has been faced with the flood damage caused by a series of significant winter storms (Ciara, Dennis and Jorge), as well as the outbreak of the

coronavirus (COVID-19). His premiership has barely begun, but it is clear that it is not going to be a tranquil one.

Throughout his career, Johnson has developed a reputation for picking and choosing whether and when to show up.<sup>6</sup> As the political commentator Katy Balls suggests, the three words, 'where's Boris Johnson?' are a regular refrain in the corridors of Whitehall, Westminster and the major print and broadcast media (Balls, 2020). During the general election, all other candidates for Prime Minister subjected themselves to a one-on-one grilling from the BBC's most fearsome political interviewer, Andrew Neil. Johnson, though, refused repeated requests to be interviewed for the BBC's prime time election coverage, leading Neil to make a statement direct to camera about the Johnson-no-show:

There is no law, no Supreme Court ruling, that can force Mr Johnson to participate in a BBC leaders' interview. But the Prime Minister of our nation will, at times, have to stand up to President Trump, President Putin, President Xi of China. So it was surely not expecting too much that he spend half an hour standing up to me . . . We do [these interviews] on your behalf to scrutinise and hold to account those who would govern us. That is democracy.<sup>7</sup>

When the February 2020 storms hit the UK, Johnson was once more conspicuous in his absence, sending his Environment Secretary instead to visit the people and places most disastrously affected. Whereas he had put himself to work with a bucket and mop during the election campaign, he decided not to show up to 'muck in' once the election was over. This led to him being labelled our 'part-time Prime Minister'.<sup>8</sup>

In March 2020, as fears over the coronavirus pandemic grew steadily, there were repeated calls for a more visible presence from the Prime Minister. On 16 March 2020, Johnson finally agreed to start holding daily press briefings on the status of the pandemic and the UK's plans for managing it. At the time of writing, he has been widely criticised not only for the substance of his government's plans, but for the more elusive aspects of his own leadership presence and his failure to inspire confidence. As the political commentator Tom Peck suggests, the edict of 'social distancing' during the pandemic takes on an uncomfortable hue when applied to our Prime Minister: 'It cannot be ruled out that some part of his psychology still hopes to socially distance himself from these events'.<sup>9</sup>

Viewed through the psychoanalytic prism of the caring leader, Johnson's no-shows are a dangerous strategy. They risk triggering primal fears of rejection and betrayal, especially at a time of uncertainty and fear when there is plenty of space for individual and collective demons to run riot. It is one thing for us to practise 'social distancing' in our own daily lives; quite another if we get even the slightest sense that our leaders are 'socially distancing' themselves from us.

Some of the reasons offered by Johnson (and his advisers) for not showing up may sound eminently reasonable on one level. For instance, in the case of the February storms, it may well be true that 'there was nothing practical I could have done to help the flood victims'; 'I did not want to get in the way of the emergency services with the circus I bring to town'; and 'I have a wonderful, talented group of ministers and officials, and this is a team effort'. At the fundamental level of the psyche, however, such excuses are missing the point. The anxieties that care – or rather, not caring – evokes go much deeper than anything to do with logic, pragmatism or appeals to supposedly empowering discourses of team work. Reason is dwarfed by the deep sense of betrayal that is evoked by the quasi-parental abandonment of not caring.

One explanation that journalists offer for Johnson's absences is that his team do not want him to be heckled. When he did go to visit one part of the country hit by storm damage, the visit was extremely tense. For many commentators, it seemed to strengthen, not diminish, the impression that he was out of touch.<sup>10</sup> A psychoanalytic view of the caring leader offers an interesting angle on such explanations. When we recall the cases of Giuliani and Ardern and contrast them with Blanco and May, what is striking about both the power and the duty of leadership is to show that one can *cope* with the distress of the event. Leaders do not show up just for the sake of it; they show up to demonstrate that the anxieties of the situation can be acknowledged, contained and endured. Of course leaders are going to get heckled in times of trouble; this is inevitable as part of a general wave of distress being projected at them. Recalling ideas from object relations theory, what matters is that they can survive this – just as the 'good enough' mother can survive the worst that an infant can throw at her, and still come back with 'I love you' (Winnicott, 1971). Enduring emotional intensity and hostility without trying to deflect, judge or retaliate is core to the emotional intelligence of leadership. This is not just for *their* sake, that is, to avoid the loss of legitimacy that an absence of care invokes (Gabriel, 2015). It is also for *ours*. It is part of how *we* develop and/or re-engage with the maturity and resilience to cope with the world without excessive splitting and other reality-avoidance defence mechanisms. In short, surviving attack and potential destruction is how leaders become useful to us psychologically (Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012).

Moreover, I wonder whether this survival element involves not only emotional endurance, but physical endurance, too. Physical resilience is also in the mix when it comes to the ability of leaders to calm our nerves and assuage our fears. Here I am reminded of how Donald Trump persistently accused his rival in the 2016 US election, Hillary Clinton, of lacking stamina and energy, whereas his own health and vitality were 'astonishingly excellent' (McCartney, 2016). With a septuagenarian candidate being lined up for the Democratic nomination in 2020, this is likely to be an issue for the next US election, too. Leaders who show up in a crisis send a message of physical as well as emotional immunity from the terrors of the world.

Emphasising the psychodynamics of leader/follower relations, Yates (2019b) suggests that Johnson's image is carefully cultivated to downplay associations with parental archetypes in favour of a kind of brotherly presence, which invites fraternal rather than parental identification. Brothers are usually less threatening than fathers, and they are not expected to be as emotionally reliable as mothers. As a brother figure, Johnson has constructed 'a persona as a benign, old-school English eccentric, who refuses to identify with superego figures of authority – such as those labelled in pejorative terms as members of the out-of-touch "metropolitan elite", or as faceless EU technocrats' (Yates, 2019b). This allows him to challenge and occasionally mock the system, whilst also being part of it. It cleverly enables a deflection of hostility and envy through his playfulness, optimism and apparently unspun informality.

Yates (2019b) places Johnson's leadership against a backdrop of widespread loss of faith in the old structures of authority and the increasing power of social media to promote more informal, more horizontal channels of communication which encourage more sibling-orientated projection. He is a product of this more vocal, more disgruntled world, but his skill lies in being able to take advantage of it. By shifting the undercurrents towards fraternal rather than parental identification, Johnson may be softening our demand that he be the steadfast, accessible, available caring leader. As a result, his no-shows might well prove to be



less damaging than other leaders' as long as he makes us feel good when he does appear. In more normal times, one can see why this might be effective, or at least, sufficient. During the coronavirus pandemic, such an approach is going to be sorely tested, for our need to be comforted and contained is much greater than at any time in most of our living memories. However entertaining a brother he may be, he is surely not completely immune from the projections of caring leadership, that is, from his duty of care.

### **When to show up, and when to maintain some distance?**

Putting the coronavirus crisis to one side for a moment, if the fraternal dynamics of Johnson's appeal mean not having to show up to everything, an interesting question is which events he should prioritise, and which he can afford to skip. Through the lens of care ethics, I suggest that the events he needs to attend more consistently are those involving a direct engagement with people who are suffering. It is widely reported in the media that Johnson hates being jeered or heckled, and is shocked whenever it seems that he is not loved by everyone in a crowd. However, showing up and surviving the outbursts of those who are suffering goes to the heart of the moral and emotional duty of leadership: It is how leaders enact their care, and it is how this gives us the resilience to practise our own self-care. Surviving the intensity of grief, shock and fear and still telling us 'I love you' is what being a 'good enough' leader is all about.

The events Johnson can more easily afford to miss are those involving engagement with the establishment, such as Andrew Neil's BBC interview. Along with other political leaders who draw on the tropes of populism – such as disparagement of elites and experts – Johnson's persona allows him to make use of the dynamics of *ressentiment* (Capriles, 2012; Ciulla, 2020; Crociani-Windland and Hoggett, 2012). *Ressentiment* is a phenomenon which taps into the frustrations and bitterness of those without power, and directs their anger towards a newly created Other. It involves what Nietzsche calls 'an inversion of values', so that what was previously good (e.g. experts) is now bad, leaving space for the repressed and powerless to claim virtue and identity in their impotence and grievance.<sup>11</sup>

Capriles (2012) and Ciulla (2020) explore how *ressentiment* can be nurtured strategically by unethical leaders to redirect anger and hostility onto the Other and present themselves as saviours or guides, despite the irony of their own elitist position. Johnson, with his sham-bolic, apparently non-threatening presence, is ideally placed to take advantage of such dynamics. As Yates (2019b) suggests,

His apparent lack of deference to the establishment sits well with an electorate who are increasingly cynical and disenchanted with politics, and he manages to ward off any potential *ressentiment* of his position as an elite politician by representing himself as an un-impinging figure that people can enjoy.

From this perspective, his absences are part of a strategy to change the rhythm of political coverage, that is, not allow himself to be driven by the pace or the agenda of the 'metropolitan elite' and the 'mainstream media' (Balls, 2020). His no-shows with the establishment shore up his anti-establishment credentials, without *overly* compromising his duty of care.

Furthermore, there are powerful arguments that *some* distance, *some* absence is actually helpful to leaders, that is, that showing up all the time might seriously undermine leadership. Grint (2010) highlights the rich tradition in literature, philosophy and history concerning the



crucial interplay between separation and proximity. Whereas leaders do need to show up to demonstrate that they care, they also need to maintain a degree of separation from their constituents, whether this is as distance or difference, or both. As Grint (2010: 94) suggests:

The ability to control distance, especially to keep others at bay and yourself beyond their gaze, is critical to maintaining the mystique of leadership; as the Wizard of Oz found to his cost after the veil hiding his ‘ordinary’ nature was drawn away.

Relatedly, there is a compelling case for not caring too much or too closely. Leaders need to show up consistently and competently enough to transmit the message that they care, but not so often or with such an intensity that their presence, proximity and availability actually stifle or disempower their constituents. Gabriel (2015: 329) underscores this risk for leaders and parents alike: ‘As every caring parent knows, excessive caring can seriously inhibit the autonomy of followers, instilling dependence and inertia . . . At what point does caring turn into overprotection and cossetting?’

Thus, the risks of leadership involve caring too much as well as caring too little. Caring too much can become overly interventionist (Tomkins and Simpson, 2015). It can result in leaders assuming, rather than finding out, what their followers need and want, depriving them of agency, identity and independence (Atack, 2020). Indeed, the assumption of followers’ needs might even be seen as an abuse of power, inspiring Ladkin (2020) to reframe caring leadership away from ‘doing unto others as you would have them do unto you’ towards ‘doing unto others as they themselves would want to be treated’. In short, a certain amount of distance and separation is warranted from the perspective of care ethics, not just as a way to legitimise leadership through mystique.

So, the question of how much separation versus proximity – how much absence versus presence – in short, how to enact an ethics of care which is neither caring too little nor caring too much – is a complex one. Katz and Kahn (1978) argue that a certain distance is needed to sustain the charisma of leadership, balanced by sufficient symbolic proximity to ensure that followers identify with their leaders. Johnson’s leadership offers a fascinating insight into how variable this fulcrum is between different leaders. He has been surviving his reputation for no-shows for years, whilst apparently appealing to broad swathes of the population despite being at the highest possible echelon of the establishment elite (Eton College, Oxford University, etc.). So far, it seems, there is enough fraternal identification and enough *ressentiment* in the air to evoke symbolic proximity whilst maintaining significant physical distance, social difference and psychological absence.

As Lowrie (2020) highlights, the paradox of caring leadership is most clearly felt in care’s negation, that is, as the interplay between being *carefree* and being *careless*. A leader’s careless absence would be one which inflicts significant damage on us as followers, and which no renegotiation of parental into fraternal identification is likely to overcome. A leader’s carefree absence, on the other hand, might be one which recognises and encourages our independence and sends a message of security in the world. The delicacy of this balancing act is hard enough for leadership in times of peace. During times of war, specifically now a war against a virus, this is going to be excruciatingly difficult, especially for a leader such as Johnson, whose persona is based precisely on his apparently *carefree* outlook. The question of whether, when and why he decides to show up crystallises this leadership dilemma.

## Final thoughts

Leaders showing up to signal care and compassion is a vital component of their emotional appeal and their moral authority. However, showing up is not in itself sufficient; they must embody and enact their care by surviving distressing situations without deflecting, retaliating or crumbling. They need to do this for their own legitimacy and survival, but they also need to do this for our well-being and our efforts to nurture our capacity for self-care. The excuses made for not showing up, such as not being able to do anything practical to help, wanting to emphasise that this is a team effort, or not wanting to be heckled, miss the point in relation to the psychodynamics of leadership.

I have suggested that the question of shows versus no-shows is a complex one. It is connected with the balance between caring too much (resulting in smothering and infantilisation) and caring too little (triggering abandonment and betrayal). It is interwoven with the balance between separation (allowing sufficient mystique) and proximity (allowing sufficient consolation and identification). In times of crisis, these scales tip differently, and leaders who give the impression that they do not care face a greater risk than usual of provoking deep insecurities. When it is impossible to be *carefree*, leaders must avoid being perceived or experienced as *careless*.

Most of all, I hope to have made a persuasive case that we are not powerless on the question of how our leaders make us feel. Understanding what leaders' presences and absences evoke in us – and why – is an important step towards changing how we respond, if we so desire. Johnson may be gambling on us not caring about his no-shows (Balls, 2020), but we can certainly decide how to try to care for ourselves.

## Acknowledgements

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## Notes

1. The Chancellor Rishi Sunak provides an updated statement on coronavirus. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-chancellor-rishi-sunak-provides-an-updated-statement-on-coronavirus>

2. COBRA (Cabinet Office Briefing Room A) is the UK government's mechanism for cross-agency response co-ordination at times of national or international emergency.
3. Show Us You Care, Ma'am! *The New York Review of Books*. <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1997/10/09/show-us-you-care-maam/>
4. With respect: how Jacinda Ardern showed the world what a leader should be. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/28/with-respect-how-jacinda-ardern-showed-the-world-what-a-leader-should-be>
5. Caring leadership is not just about showing up, or even just about showing up at the right time with the right emotional expertise. Showing up is merely the angle on which I focus here. For a much broader and multi-disciplinary insight into the complexities and contradictions of caring leadership, see Tomkins (2020).  
Also, I do not want to imply that the power of the maternal archetype means that women leaders are better at care – or find care more 'natural' – than men. Indeed, the relationship between real-life women leaders and the maternal archetype can be extremely difficult. Yates (2019a), for instance, highlights how both Theresa May and Angela Merkel are dogged by associations of inappropriate womanhood, especially in their relationship with children and fecundity.
6. Boris Johnson's Disappearing Act is More Risky as Prime Minister than as Mayor. <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2020/02/boris-johnson-s-disappearing-act-more-risky-prime-minister-mayor>
7. The Theme is Trust: Andrew Neil Tells Boris Johnson He Has 'Oven-ready' Interview in Attack on PM for Dodging Scrutiny. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/andrew-neil-boris-johnson-interview-video-questions-nhs-social-care-austerity-a9234956.html>
8. PMQs: Jeremy Corbyn Attacks Part-time Prime Minister over Flooding Response. <https://news.sky.com/story/pmqs-jeremy-corbyn-attacks-part-time-prime-minister-over-flooding-response-11943652>
9. At this Most Desperate Hour, Britain Desperately Needs Better than Boris Johnson. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/boris-johnson-coronavirus-latest-chris-whitty-press-conference-a9405356.html>
10. Traitor! Boris Johnson Heckled as He Visits Flood-Hit Area of Worcestershire. <https://news.sky.com/story/traitor-boris-johnson-heckled-as-he-visits-flood-hit-area-of-worcestershire-11952918>
11. It is interesting to see how experts are coming back into favour in the coronavirus pandemic. Having disparaged experts when they were unhelpful to the Brexit cause, now Boris Johnson is hardly ever seen without them.

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## Author biography

**Leah Tomkins** is Senior Lecturer in Leadership and Organisation Studies at the Open University, UK. Her academic research focuses on the subjective experiences of leadership, often drawing on philosophy and the humanities to help us with the meanings, narratives, emotions and visceralities of work and the workplace – both when they seem to make sense and, even more so, when they do not. She is the editor of a multi-disciplinary collection of papers on *Paradox and Power in Caring Leadership: Critical and Philosophical Reflections*,

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